

[Astor on Garrison, 'German Americans on the Middle Border: From Antislavery to Reconciliation, 1830-1877'](#)

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Zachary Stuart Garrison. *German Americans on the Middle Border: From Antislavery to Reconciliation, 1830-1877.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2019. 232 pp. \$30.00

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Untitled[German Americans on the Middle Border: From Antislavery to Reconciliation, 1830-1877 by Zachary Garrison]

The literature on nineteenth-century German immigration to the United States and participation in the American Civil War continues to develop. Historians like Bruce Levine, Walter Kamphoefner, Alison Efford, Mischa Honeck, Andre Fleche, and Kristen Layne Anderson have offered robust and nuanced explanations of German immigrants' distinctive role in the political, cultural, and ethno-racial transformations shaping mid-nineteenth-century America.[1] Zachary Garrison's *German Americans on the Middle Border: From Antislavery to Reconciliation, 1830-1877* adds to this growing body of literature. Like most other books in this vein, Garrison focuses on the "midwestern" United States primarily, leaving aside sizable German communities in places such as New York, New Orleans, Texas, or Pennsylvania. But his interpretation stands apart by altering the chronological framework and reassessing the ideological principles animating many German American communities.

Garrison's book examines the mid-nineteenth-century "Middle Border," a region defined by many American "Border States" historians to include both free and slave states. Specifically, the "Middle Border" incorporates southern Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, the Ohio River portion of Kentucky, and the state of Missouri. At the heart of the Middle Border were the cities of St. Louis, Louisville, Evansville, and Cincinnati, though smaller towns like Cape Girardeau and Hermann, Missouri, and Belleville, Illinois, are also included. In this heartland area of the United States, Germans arrived in large numbers beginning in the 1830s, and they immediately altered the political landscape of an already divided region. By 1860, they had become a decidedly antislavery element, regardless of their residence in free or slave states. In fact, as Garrison points out, Germans living in proximity to slavery were more antislavery than those living further north in cities like Milwaukee. These German immigrants volunteered early for the Union cause and vigorously supported emancipation, often before other Union soldiers. After the war, their politics started to shift away from Radical Republicanism and toward the new Liberal Republican movement that downplayed matters of Reconstruction in favor of economic development and national "reconciliation."

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How, why, and when Germans contributed to this story is the point of departure for historians. Garrison offers four new interpretative points. First, he begins his discussion long before 1848 with the so-called Dreissigers, who settled in the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys in the 1830s. From the beginning, German Lutherans, Catholics, Jews, and freethinkers settled in geographically disparate American communities while attempting to forge a German American identity. By starting as early as the 1830s, Garrison assesses the extent to which the 1848ers actually changed—or solidified—existing German American political values. Dreissigers invited a whole range of Germans to settle in the region, some of them religious exiles like the Saxon Lutherans who rejected the Prussian Union (and formed the Missouri Synod) and Catholics from Westphalia and Bavaria. Others were secular liberal nationalists chafing under the Metternich system. But most were economic migrants dislocated by land-hungry Junkers and early industrialization. They established newspapers that welcomed new immigrants to cities and “colonies” in the American West.

Garrison’s second interpretative point is the emphasis on *Bildung* as an ideological driver of German political identification in America. *Bildung* referred to intellectual and physical self-improvement through a combination of education, moral improvement, community engagement, and gymnastics. Anything standing in the way of *Bildung* was to be opposed, whether it be authoritarian rule, self-righteous temperance and anti-immigrant reformers, or slaveholding aristocrats. Garrison notes the congruence of *Bildung* with American Jeffersonian principles and later, with free soilism. For this reason, German immigrants found themselves at home in the Jacksonian Democratic Party before shifting to the Republicans in the late 1850s. By starting with the Dreissigers, Garrison shows that the 1848ers contributed revolutionary zeal to an antislavery ideology already in place. Indeed, the new Turner societies (Turnverein) appearing after 1848 promoted the *Bildung* that Dreissigers had encouraged a decade before. Garrison rightly counters Kristin Anderson’s claim that Germans were largely apathetic—or even sympathetic toward—slavery before the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. Germans may have switched parties in the 1850s or continued to back the Northern Democrat Stephen Douglas, but they were mostly antislavery all along. They were not abolitionists, to be sure, and they deeply resented the New England-based abolitionists who tended to oppose both slavery and immigration. But they were avowedly anti-“Southern Democrat,” which positioned them on the vanguard of Thomas Hart Benton’s 1850 free soil Democratic campaign in St. Louis, and later the Missouri Republican Party led by Frank Blair.

The third intervention has to do with German participation in the Civil War itself, especially the guerrilla conflict engulfing Missouri. Drawing upon newer scholarship on Missouri’s guerrilla war, Garrison emphasizes both the community protection and retaliatory logic of guerrilla war. Sam Hildebrand, ironically the descendant of Germans long before the nineteenth century, became one of the chief antagonists of German Missourians in southeastern Missouri. But Germans willingly took the lead against secessionists at St. Louis’s Camp Jackson in May 1861, against Confederate guerrillas across the state, and for General John C. Fremont’s abortive and premature emancipation program in August 1861. Germans, labeled “Black Dutch” by their opponents, were targets of guerrillas, but enthusiastically filled the ranks of pro-Union militias. Germans also squared off against conservative Unionists who dragged their feet on emancipation.

Garrison’s fourth intervention has to do with the timing of German abandonment of radicalism. Unlike Alison Efford, who argues that Germans supported the principle of black suffrage in 1865 (albeit with an ethnic strain of citizenship), Garrison finds that Germans expressed misgivings about

black suffrage from the beginning.[2] Much of this is obscured by the role of Charles Drake, a former Whig and Know Nothing who alienated Germans long before he proposed a proscriptive constitution. Drake's constitution rejected black suffrage and removed ex-Confederates from the polity. Germans feared that disfranchisement of ex-Confederates would undermine *Bildung*, which requires a more universal freedom and citizenship to function. Garrison is right that suspicion and fear of racial equality led to German opposition to black suffrage in Missouri. But his assessment of the meaning of black suffrage could draw more from Efford's analysis of Germans' unique conception of political principle as opposed to personal fear of competition.

German Americans on the Middle Border is an important book and makes for good reading for those new to the field as well as those already versed in the debates over mid-nineteenth-century German Americans. It is clearly written and nicely organized. The focus at times tends to lean more heavily toward Missouri than other states. It also emphasizes strongly the opinions of male, middle-class household heads, although Garrison does not ignore the voices of individual women or working-class organizations. Historians of German immigration may disagree with Garrison's emphasis on *Bildung* as the driving cultural spirit or wonder how that liberal ideal coalesced with increasingly radical socialists who arrived in the late 1870s. Garrison also eschews German unification politics in 1870-71, a significant moment in German American identity formation according to Alison Efford.[3] But more than anything else, Garrison's *German Americans on the Middle Border* offers an excellent synthesis and starting point for readers curious about the German American experience in the Civil War era.

Notes

[1]. Bruce Levine, *The Spirit of 1848: German Immigrants, Labor Conflict, and the Coming of the Civil War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992); Walter Kamphoefner, *The Wesfalians: From Germany to Missouri* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987); Alison Efford, *German Immigrants, Race, and Citizenship in the Civil War Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Mischa Honeck, *We Are the Revolutionists: German-Speaking Immigrants and American Abolitionists after 1848* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011); Andrew Fleche, *The Revolution of 1861: The American Civil War in the Age of Nationalist Conflict* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); and Kristen Layne Anderson, *Abolitionizing Missouri: German Immigrants and Racial Ideology in Nineteenth Century America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2016).

[2]. Efford, *German Immigrants*, 115-42.

[3]. *Ibid.*, 143-70.

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